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ABSTRACT

Compound verbs such as "stage-manage" and "curry-comb," taken from Alex Haley's novel "Roots," are compared to their equivalents in the German version of the book. In most cases, one of three strategies is used for translation: (1) using a non-compound semantic equivalent, (2) constructing an expression that coincides with the syntagma underlying the compound, or (3) constructing a characteristic phrase. A typological difference between the two languages that accounts for these strategies is sketched. (Author/MSE)

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Werner Hüllen

Translating English Compound Verbs into German

Compound verbs of the type stage manage and curry-comb, taken out of Alex Haley's novel Roots, are compared to their equivalents in the German version. In most of the cases one of three strategies is employed for translation: (I) using a non-compound semantic equivalent, (II) constructing an expression which coincides with the syntagma underlying the compound, (III) constructing a characterizing phrase. A typological difference between the two languages will be sketched which accounts for these strategies.

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Translating English compound verbs into German. An investigation based on Alex Haley's Roots/Wurzeln.

Paper presented at the Eigth
World Converence of Applied Linguistics
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1. Preliminary remarks

In this paper a project is described which has a long-standing personal impression as its starting point. Whenever I read a newspaper or some other text written in a fairly general register, I meet such compound verbs as baby-sit, tiptoe, crash-land or spoon-feed![1] They allow complex meanings to be expressed elegantly and precisely, but their translations into German, as a rule though not always, demand a longish, sometimes cumbersome, phrase. A quick perusal of papers of only one day (30 July 1986) yielded such verbs as manhandle, finger-print, video-record, strip-search, casework, treasure-hunt, and some others. In the given contexts their German translations would be 'berühren und in seiner Lage (und Beschaffenheit) verändern', 'Fingerabdrücke aufnehmen/sicherstellen', 'auf Videoband aufnehmen', 'einer Körperkontrolle unterziehen', 'eine Akte anlegen/einen Fall aus etwas machen', 'auf Schatzsuche gehen'. Of course, German always does allow the exact translation of such words, but the equivalent expressions, as the few examples already show, tend to be longer and more complicated, which in many cases means more marked. Sometimes they lack or deviate from some semantic components of the English verbs as is, for example, the case in strip-search/'einer Körperkontrolle unterziehen', where the component 'strip' is lost.

From these observations I formed the hypothesis that compounding verbs is a powerful and productive means of expression in English, but not in German. It seemed promising to me to investigate this hypothesis and prove and illustrate it with a corpus of compound verbs taken from a randomly chosen text. ⌠

As the source for my corpus of compound verbs I selected Alex Haley's novel Roots because of its generally understandable narrative style and the predilection which this author seems to have for the type of expressions mentioned. In selecting a novel I avoided specialized registers of any sort. The choice of the sample text also depended on the fact that American English favours compound verbs more than British or other English does.

The general idea behind my project is that every text of some length and originality demands some creativity by its author which enables him/her to say or write what nobody else has so far said or written. Investigating English compound verbs in contrast to their German translations seems a promising chance to describe the strategies of such creativity as exercised in handling lexis in two languages. Though we cannot generalize from what one author does with his/her language, the results of the investigation should throw some light on the potential of strategies for creativity which the English language provides for its users and which a translator must cope with when rendering the text into German.

2. Compound verbs and word-formation theory

Contrary to what has been introduced as a personal impression, word-formation theory maintains that there are no proper compound verbs in English at all, apart from the type overdo, underrate, backlash, which, besides the verb, contain a local particle in a literal or, more frequently, in a figurative meaning[2]. The others, so-called "pseudo-verbal compounds" are explained as back derivations from nominal compounds of the type

> stage manager → stage-manage, or as zero derivation of the type curry-comb (sb.) → curry comb (v.). The first type is explained by an initial zero derivation which turns the nominal compound into a verb (stage manager + Ø) followed by deletions of the zero element (Ø) and the determinatum morpheme of the nominal compound (er) which lead to the morphematic shape of an already existing verb (manage), now,however,as part of a compound verb (stage-manage). The second type is explained as zero derivation parallel to derivation by suffix, as in the parallel cases curry-comb (sb.) → curry-comb + Ø (v.) and atom → atomize.[3]

Systematically speaking, these explanations are of course faultless; the problem, however, is that at least back derivation runs counter to the intuition of the language user. The "long" derivation of stage-manage, as shown above, is suggested by the fact that stage manager is older than stage-manage. The systematic derivation in this case copies the historical development. However, as soon as stage-manage possesses in the mind of the language user the state of a normally used verb, it should, according to the principles of synchronic linguistics, be looked upon as the basic word in relation to which stage manager is a derivation, just as baker is a derivation of bake.

For the purposes of this paper it seems justified to disregard all historical sequence and maintain that English does in fact have compound verbs. Thus, the relation of stage-manage to stage manager is supposed to correspond to the relation of bake to baker.

Words which function as verbs and as substantives without any overt morphological difference like cry (v.) and cry (sb.), buy (v.) and buy (sb.) pose the problem which of the two in each pair is primary and which is derived by a zero morpheme. Historical considerations again should not count; besides, as this kind of conversion applies to an abundance of verbs/substantives, many of them belonging to the oldest stock of English vocabulary, historical considerations would in many cases not yield any result.

With lexemes like slap, nap or dream it seems correct to say that the verb is primary and the substantive secondary, i.e. derived by zero morpheme, because the substantive meaning conveys an occurrence of the action, state, process, event, etc. which the verb denotes. Thus, in order to understand what a single occurrence of a state (for example a dream) is, understanding of the state itself is required. The occurrence adds something to the state itself.

However, with lexemes like comb, crop, toe it is the other way round. In these cases, the verb meanings add something to the substantive meanings, and, thus, require them semantically. The new semantic elements vary, according to verb meanings, for example comb (v.) denoting 'use something as an instrument', crop (v.) denoting 'bring about something as a result' and toe (v.) denoting 'use something as the place of an action'.

Thus, our theoretical starting point is that, indeed, there are compound verbs in English many of which can be explained as zero derivations from nouns.

3. Compound verbs in Roots

The strategies of creativity in lexis mentioned earlier will be described by a certain ordering in tables of the compound verbs that appear in Roots.

Table 1 left hand side gives the compound verbs that occur in the novel as finite predicates or as infinitives, which,however, do not occupy the position of noun phrases in a sentence. 29 compound verbs occur, which are broken down into groups of those lexemes that have entries (i) as verbs and as substantives in the OED and in Webster, (ii) as verbs only, (iii) as substantives only, and (iv) not at all. It is assumed that entries in these two comphrehensive dictionaries mark any word of the English language as being accepted within one or several word classes.

Table 1 right hand side indicates the syntagma which can be assumed as deep structure of the compound verbs. Note poleax as an example:

to ax meaning 'to use ax' [INSTR + zero derivation] is compounded with pole [PARTIT] and constitutes the syntagma 'Sb uses ax with pole'.

In the same way we can explain:

to bag meaning 'to use bag' [INSTR/OBJECT + zero derivation] is compounded with sand [CONTENTS] and constitutes the syntagma 'Sb uses bag containing sand', idiomatized into 'Sb protects sth with bag containing sand'

to step meaning 'to do step' [ACTION + zero derivation] is compounded with 'side' [LOCAT] and constitutes the syntagma 'Sb makes step aside'

to toe meaning 'to walk on toe' [INSTR / LOCAT + zero derivation] is compounded with 'tip' [PARTIT] and constitutes the syntagma 'Sb uses toes on/with their tips', idiomatized into 'Sb walks on tips of toes'.

Table 1 proves that the author uses three strategies in writing his text as far as compound verbs are concerned. The first strategy is the exploitation of the means of expression which the English language possesses by virtue of its (compounded) lexicon. It is, of course, not a truly creative strategy, because it merely means using expressions which the author finds ready-made. This applies to the compound verbs noted in the two dictionaries as verbs and as substantives (from backslap to whitewash) as well as to the three compound verbs (highstep, housebreak, sharecrop) which are only documented as verbs.

The second strategy is the conversion[4] of compound substantives into compound verbs in cases where only compound substantives are documented in the two dictionaries (bear-hug, big-talk, blacksmith, haystack). There is a creative element in this, because the author does not merely use ready-made linguistic units, but he exploits the general possibility of zero derivation with compound verbs, applying it to cases where zero derivation has so far only been used with simple verbs. Even if not too exciting, this is a strategy whose creative power is more the author's than the language's.

The third strategy is the formation of compound verbs which, according to the two dictionaries, do not exist at all. Seven cases (from doublegrip to steelpunch) are to be found. The creative element here is even stronger than with the foregoing group because the author, starting from a simple verb, exploits the general possibility of compounding in order to create entirely new lexeme combinations. This possibility is of a more abstract and broader nature than the possibility of zero derivation and, thus, demands a stronger creative power.

These strategies, of course, all use the systemic resources of the English language, i.e. lexemes and principles of word formation. They contain, however, an increasing share of individual creativity.

4. Compound verbs in the English/German dictionary

In order to see which strategies were used for the translation of the cases mentioned above into German, they were firstly compared to the entries in (Der Neue) Muret-Sanders' Langenscheidts Enzyklopädisches Wörterbuch Deutsch/Englisch und Englisch/Deutsch as the most comprehensive bilingual dictionary in use, and secondly to the German translation in Wurzeln.

Naturally, the words that do not occur in either form in the two English dictionaries consulted do not show up in the bilingual dictionary either. They are given in the first part of table 2. The second part of table 2 gives words that do have entries in the two English dictionaries, but are missing in the English/German one. These words, then, must be left aside for the moment.

Table 3 states words from Roots that have translations in Muret-Sanders, broken down into groups of such compounds as occur in the novel (i) as verbs, and (ii) as verbs and substantives ending on ing. The translations are shortened versions from Muret/Sanders which, however, will make the point in focus visible. Figurative meanings have been omitted in all cases.

A comparison between English and German versions supposed to be equivalent[5] from the first group of verbs of table 3 yields the following results:

Only two verbal compounds (sleepwalk and spot-weld) have a semantic and morphological, i.e. total, equivalent, all other verbs use different surface structures. And even with

these two we encounter pragmatic difficulties. Punktschweißen is limited in German to a very narrow register and would hardly be used in a novel. Schlafwandeln, given in Muret-Sanders as substantive and as adjective but not as verb, is only of limited usability, because of the uncertain grammatical status of its first part. This German compound verb is hardly acceptable in cases where prefixes are usually postponed to the end of the constituent and will in such cases be replaced by im Schlaf wandeln. Compare:

- umgehen: Er umgeht die Kreuzung
  Er geht um die Kreuzung (herum).
- schlafwandeln: ?Er schlafwandelt bei Mondschein.
  *Er wandelt s[illegible]chlaf bei Mondschein.
  Er wandelt bei Mondschein im Schlaf

Thus, sleepwalk/schlafwandeln and spot-weld/punktschweißen are nearer to each other than any other words under discussion, but they are still not perfect equivalents.

There are two compound verbs which have exact semantic equivalents, but are morphologically different. Currycomb and whitewash are compounds in English, but not so in German (striegeln and tünchen).

Highstep must be disregarded, because the German dictionary only gives a translation of the adjective version highstepping. Housebreak must also be neglected because of its highly idiomatized meaning which is not mentioned in the German dictionary at all.

There remain four compound verbs (poleax, sandbag, sidestep, tiptoe) whose German translation at least formally corresponds to the syntagma contained in the compound. Compare list 1:

- poleax: mit der Axt erschlagen/somebody uses ax with pole
- sandbag: mit Sandsäcken befestigen/somebody uses bag containing sand
- sidestep: beiseite treten/somebody makes step aside
- tiptoe: auf den Zehenspitzen gehen/somebody uses tips of toes (= walks)

In all four cases the zero element in English has to be replaced by a surface structure element in German. This is the predicate part of the syntagma.

Lastly, there are two verbal compounds (bear-hug, catnap) whose meaning is given by way of a phrase, which in the two cases under discussion contains characterizing adjectives and a diminutive form. In both cases we have nominal phrases which can, however, easily be verbalized.

Our comparison results in four types of German equivalents to English compound verbs:

- semantic and morphological (= total) equivalents
- semantic (but not morphological) equivalents
- (deep structure) syntagmatic equivalents
- phrasal equivalents

The corresponding strategies of translation i.e. strategies of creatively handling German vocabulary can be described as:

- looking for the total equivalent of a compound verb
- looking for a non-compound verb as the semantic equivalent for a compound verb
- constructing an expression which coincides with the syntagma underlying a compound verb
- constructing a characterizing phrase.

From this first comparison it will be noted that of the three strategies mentioned earlier only the first one, i.e. using verbal compounds, is traceable in the translation and this only in two cases and even then with pragmatic limitations.

Of the following group three compound verbs (blacksmith[ing], sharecrop[ping] and tomcat[ting]) have only nominal entries in the German dictionaries, which are no equivalents. Of the remaining two one (kidnap[ping]) is matched with a syntagmatic equivalent, the other one (daydream[ing]) with a phrasal equivalent.

Statistically speaking we find: Out of 17 cases two are given as total equivalents, two as semantic equivalents, five as syntagmatic equivalents and one as a phrasal equivalent. Seven cases (which is a lot) just leave blanks. They add to the 11 unsolved cases which were listed in table 2 making 18.

5. Compound verbs and translation strategies in Wurzeln

Table 4 lists the compound verbs of the novel together with the verbs of their German translations, the latter in infinitival form. There are two cases (tomcat and sweet-talk) which have been turned into German substantives, in both cases nomina actionis. Two compounds (steelpunch and sharecrop) have not been translated at all, four more (clip-clop, housebreak, hackfight, sleepwalk) are special cases, which for various reasons, must be disregarded [6].

An analysis of the remaining 26 compound verbs yields the following results:

There is no total equivalent in German, i.e. the translator does not use any German compound verb at all.

Group 1 contains nine semantic equivalents which match the English compound verb with a German verb which is either simple or prefixed. Two of these (whitewash/weißen, spot-weld/schweißen) are coined by simply leaving one part of the English compound out.

Group 2 contains nine syntagmatic equivalents. Five of them (poleax, haystack, sandbag, tiptoe, blacksmith) express the zero element of the English compound verb with a predicate. The others (drumtalk, backslap, whitewash, doublegrip) are not zero derivations. The German translations do not always represent the English compound fully; this applies to poleax/Axt (Stielaxt), tiptoe/Zehen (Zehenspitzen), blacksmith/Schmied (Grobschmied ?).

Group 3 contains eight compound verbs which are translated as phrases. Guess translate/versuchsweise übersetzen, hopskip/vergnügt hüpfen, catnap/(eine Zeit) im Halbschlaf verbringen use an adverbial. The others - including the nominal expression mit gutem Zureden for sweet-talk - go back to paraphrases which move away from the English words in their literal meaning, with big-talk/(jemanden) betont herablassend behandeln as the most extreme case in this respect.

It is obvious from this comparison that the three English strategies mentioned, i.e.

using compound verbs
conversion of compound substantives into compound verbs
formation of new compound verbs

have been replaced by the strategies

using a non-compound verb as the semantic equivalent for an English compound verb
constructing an expression which coincides with the syntagma underlying an English compound verb
constructing a characterizing phrase for an English compound verb.

6. Conclusions

The juxtaposed strategies have some systematic traits. The translator of Roots and indirect author of Wurzeln does not use any compound verbs.

Obviously the possibilities of compounding are limited in German as compared with English in the cases under investigation.

In all other, i.e. in most, cases three strategies are employed:

- using a non-compound semantic equivalent
- constructing an expression which coincides with the syntagma underlying the English compound
- constructing a characterizing phrase.

Using a semantic equivalent, as a rule, employs a lexeme with idiomatized meaning (like striegeln for'currycomb') or results in the loss of some semantic feature(s) of the English verb (like in ungestüm umarmen for'bear-hug'). Constructing a syntagmatically explicit expression makes use of the fact that the surface structure of English compound verbs and -ing-derivations quite often lacks semantic distinctions which are present in the deep structure. Characterizing phrases do the same with the difference, however, that they repeat the semantic deep structure of the English verb in a somewhat looser way.

We can rule out the possibility that the strategies found in the German translation as compared to the English original depend on a stylistic idiosyncracy of the translator. Rather, a typological difference between the two languages becomes visible here which seems to have a general validity[7]. Many semantic distinctions which are made in the surface structure of German sentences are not made in the surface structure of English sentences but are 'understood'. Such understanding makes use of the language context and of encyclopedic world knowledge. German surface structures, thus, exhibit less ambiguities than English, or in the case of translations, unless there is a total or an idiomatic equivalent, German surface structures must be made more expressive and precise than English. Among other things, this leads to a much wider semantic potential of sentence parts in English than in German which is juxtaposed by a much tighter 'fit' between sentence parts and semantic representations in German than in English.

Such typological differences, which have been described for the two languages at large, have in this paper been shown to surface in compound verbs. They can make us see why this type of word plays such an important role in the public registers of contemporary English, but not in the comparable registers of German. This statement is,of course, meant to be descriptive, not evaluative.[8]

Notes:

[1] There are no general spelling rules for hyphenation in compound verbs. As a rule, I use the spelling I found in the sources for this project, i.e. most of all in Roots.

[2] See Marchand 1969.

[3] See Kastovsky 1982: 172-175.

[4] See Leisi 1985: 106-116, besides Kastovsky 1982: 78-80.

[5] For the notion of translation equivalence, see Koller 1978.

[6] Clip-clop freely translated into 'auf (einen Ort) zufahren'; housebreak idiomatized to 'stubenrein sein/werden'; hackfight semantically expanded to 'mit Hahnenkämpfen (Schulden, etc.) abarbeiten'; sleepwalk syntactically transposed into 'wie ein Schlafwandler'.

[7] For the following consult J. A. Hawkins 1986 passim, with reference to translation 73.

[8] I owe thanks to Eva Junk and Richard Nate for their help in working through the two versions of the novel and in compiling the information necessary out of the three dictionaries. Furthermore, I owe thanks to Dr Richard Brunt for commenting on the contents of this paper as well as on its language. Any faults remain of course mine.

Table 1

GROUP 1	backslap	V	S	slap: + LOCATION Sb slaps sb on back
	catnap	V	S	nap: + COMPARISON Sb naps like cat
	clip-clop	V	S	clop: + ADDITION (sound imitation)[1] Sb clips and clops (= moves)
	currycomb	V	S	comb: + ADDITION Sb curries and uses comb (for horse)
	daydream	V	S	dream: + TIME / MANNER Sb dreams during day (= awake)
	kidnap	V	S	nap: + OBJECTIVE[2] Sb na(b)ps kids
	poleax	V	S	ax: + PART Sb uses ax with pole
	sandbag	V	S	bag: + CONTENTS[3] Sb uses (= protects sth wth) bag containing san
	sidestep	V	S	step: + LOCATION Sb makes step aside
	sleepwalk	V	S	walk: + MANNER Sb walks sleeping
	spot-weld	V	S	weld: + LOCATION Sb welds sth on a spot
	sweet-talk	V	S	talk: + MANNER Sb talks sweetly
	tiptoe	V	S	toe: + PART[4] Sb uses toes (= walks) on/with their tips
	tomcat	V	S	cat: + COMPARISON + ADDITION Sb behaves like a Tom (= masculine being) and a cat
	whitewash	V	S	wash: + COLOUR Sb washes sth white
GROUP 2	highstep	V		step: + LOCATION / MANNER Sb steps with high strides
	housebreak	V		break: + LOCATION / PURPOSE Sb breaks(will of animal)for(living in) house[5]
	sharecrop	V		crop: + ADDITION Sb collects crop and shares it with sb else[6]
GROUP 3	bear-hug		S	hug: + COMPARISON Sb hugs sb like bears do
	big-talk		S	talk: + MANNER Sb talks in a big (= boasting) way
	blacksmith		S	smith: + APPEARANCE Sb works as smith, who looks black[7]
	haystack		S	stack: + MATERIAL Sb piles up stack, which consists of hay

GROUP 4	doublegrip	grip: + MANNER / NUMBER Sb grips sb twice
	drumtalk	talk: + INSTRUMENT Sb talks with help of drum
	guess translate	translate: + ADDITION[8] Sb guesses and translates
	hackfight	fight: + AGENT / EXPERIENCER A hack (= cock) fights against another hack (= cock)
	hopskip	skip: + ADDITION Sb hops and skips
	mock-fight	fight: + MANNER Sb fights in a pretending way
	steelpunch	punch: + INSTRUMENT Sb punches sth with steel pin

Notes:

[1] idiomatic expansion of meaning from 'making sound' to 'move and make sound'

[2] according to the OED slang or cant or colloquial; the verb hardly exists as a simple ver nowadays

[3] idiomatic expansion of meaning from 'handling sandbags' to 'achieve something by handling sandbags'

[4] idiomatic narrowing of meaning from 'using one's toes' to 'walking in a special way'

[5] fully idiomatized to 'clean' so that the paraphrase practically becomes useless

[6] idiomatized in a legal sense

[7] idiomatized: smith working over fire

[8] nominalization by ion-morpheme; besides 'occurrence of translating' meaning 'text as result of translating'

Table 2.1

doublegrip
drumtalk
guess translate
hackfight(ing)
hopskip
mock-fight
steelpunch

Table 2.2

backslap
big-talk
clip-clop
sweet-talk

Table 3

GROUP 1	bear-hug	ungestüme Umarmung
	catnap	Nickerchen, kurzes Schläfchen
	currycomb	Striegel, striegeln
	highstep	hochtrabend (highstepping)
	housebreak	Einbruch, Abbruch*
	poleax	Streitaxt, mit der Axt erschlagen
	sandbag	Sandsack, mit Sandsäcken befestigen, verstopfen
	sidestep	Seitenschritt, mit Seitenschritt (einem Schlag) ausweichen, beiseite treten
	sleepwalk	Schlafwandeln,(sleepwalking): schlafwandelnd
	spot-weld	Punktschweißen
	tiptoe	Zehenspitze, auf den Zehenspitzen gehen
	whitewash	Tünche; tünchen, weißen
GROUP 2	blacksmithing	blacksmith: Schmied
	daydream(ing)	daydream: Wachtraum; mit offenen Augen träumen
	kidnap(ping)	Kinder, Menschen rauben
	sharecrop(ping)	sharecropper: Amerik. Pächter, der seine Pacht mit einem Teil der Ernte entrichtet
	tomcat(ting)	tomcat: Kater

*This entry does not accord with the meaning of housebreak as used in Roots and could well have been omitted.

Table 4

GROUP Ø	-	
GROUP 1	kidnap:	entführen, rauben (2; O = 2)[1]
	tomcat:	herumtreiben (3; O = 3)[2] Herumstreunen
	currycomb:	striegeln
	highstep:	einherstolzieren
	sidestep:	ausweichen
	tiptoe:	schleichen
	daydream:	sich ausmalen
	whitewash:	weißen
	spot-weld:	schweißen
GROUP 2	drumtalk:	die Trommel (etwas) ausrufen lassen
	backslap:	(jem) auf die Schuler schlagen
	whitewash:	weiß anmalen
	poleax:	von der Axt getroffen werden
	haystack:	im Heu sein
	sandbag:	mit Sandsäcken verbarrikadieren
	tiptoe:	auf Zehen schleichen
	blacksmith:	ein(richtiger)Schmied sein, werden (O = 3)
	doublegrip:	doppelt schütteln
GROUP 3	guess translate:	versuchsweise übersetzen
	hopskip:	vergnügt hüpfen
	catnap:	(eine Zeit) im Halbschlaf verbringen
	poleax:	vor den Kopf schlagen, sprachlos (adj)
	big-talk:	(jem) betont herablassend behandeln
	bear-hug:	in die Arme nehmen
	mock-fight:	Kleinkämpfe austragen
	sweet-talk:	mit gutem Zureden

[1] Numbers after entries indicate frequency of occurrence in Wurzeln if more than one. O = 2 means: not translated into German in 2 cases.

[2] Capitalization indicates the nomen actionis contrary to the infinitive of a verb.

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